The Basgha of the Mogho Naba, or the Nights the Emperor M'ba (Rarengma) Sleeps Away from Home

(May my father not arrive before I do.)

769 782 796 The basgha. Before making use of his newly harvested crops, the Moaga ikanda (married man, head of a family) is obligated to offer this new produce to his ancestors. Therefore, he has dam (dolo, millet beer) prepared with the large red [153] millet, already sprouted, and cakes made with the millet or the sorghum. He kills chickens and a goat, or a ram, and invites his neighbors and relatives to the feast. He is convinced that the manes of his ancestors share the feast.

The emperor of the Mossi is no exception to this rule. The basgha of the Mogho Naba is celebrated with more pomp, and we shall describe it briefly below.

It should first be noted that there is no particular date set by custom for the basgha, either for the Mogho Naba or for the ordinary Moaga. Everyone celebrates it whenever he can after the harvest.

491 653 The sotasgo (completion of the road). Before the French came and the administration took over road building, each minister had a road or, more accurately, a broad path which led straight to the king's courtyard and which had to be maintained by the minister. Since everyone is busy in the fields during the winter months, it is easily understandable that the roads are somewhat neglected during that season. When the Mogho Naba decides to put everything to rights with his ancestors, he notifies the Ouidi Naba, his first minister, who sends word to the other ministers that they must clear their soyan (from soré, "path"). The ministers order the inhabitants of their respective sections to do the work, but put off completing the last stretch leading into the courtyard, samandé, [154] until the date for sotasgo is known.

653 Sotasgo takes place on a Saturday.

The Ouidi Naba makes a large pile of several loads of millet (kaguindi) and chooses about forty strong young men to carry it into the court of the king. His colleagues (Larhallé Naba, Gounga

326 iron bar on an iron stump planted in the ground or on a stone. Copper
306 and zinc are smelted in small clay crucibles, the size of which varies with the desired thickness of the bracelet. The bracelet is first made in wax and coated with well-kneaded clayey earth which acquires the same shape. The wax is then removed with boiling water, and copper is poured into the clay mold. With a crude file the jewelry-maker removes the dross which clings to the metal, polishes the bracelet, and carves designs into it. The most skillful among them make attractive twisted ornaments of iron and red and yellow copper. One Ouagadougou Christian, deft at modeling wax, makes all sorts of objects, such as napkin rings, paper weights, inkwells, figurines, etc., which are not lacking in style.

484 The Mossi have always travelled a little, and they used to go quite regularly to Timbuktu; now, thanks to the French peace, journeys have become increasingly frequent. The European settlers in Tenkodogo, Ouagadougou, Léo, and Koudougou hire the Mossi as house boys and [464] take them to Ségou, sometimes to Kayes, and even to Saint-Louis. These boys, when they return, fill their friends with wonder and arouse their desire to take such great journeys also.

484 The recruitment of Black troops has also fostered this desire to see
464 new lands. Many natives have made the trip to Bandiagara to enlist as riflemen; others went to Kati, and when they found that no further enlistments were being made there, they went on to Saint-Louis.

484 During the dry season the Mossi are more often lured away by trading ventures. In October and November many young men who have managed to secure a sheep or two or a few goats and the wealthier natives who own cattle organize caravans in the hope of selling their livestock at a profit in faraway markets. In former times the Yarsé and Haoussa had a monopoly on trade. Nowadays the Mossi compete [651] with them, for they must find money to pay taxes to the Whites, the 648 famous five-franc piece. /60/ Besides, now the roads are safe. Highway robbers are no longer to be feared, and one no longer has to pay tolls every time he enters the territory of a new chief. From this point of view, and from it alone, the French peace is valued by the natives, although they find it onerous to pay taxes, to build roads and bridges, and to pay customs duties on leaving and re-entering French territory. Is a man ever pleased when something is required of him, even for his greatest good?

491 Now only the watercourses present some difficulty when they are full. The Administration, which does all it can to facilitate trade,

491 builds bridges, but as they are made exclusively with materials found in the country, forked sticks and beams covered with pounded earth, the first swelling of the water carries the whole structure away, and after a heavy rain one must wait for the waters to subside and resort to ferrymen who justifiably charge for their work.

481 484 501 The ferrymen proceed as follows. The person who wishes to cross holds on to a thick beam, a gourd, or a simple clay jar, which holds him out of the water; sometimes two large sticks under his arms serve as a life belt. In a few places rafts are available, made of sticks connected with séko and covered with dry grass. The ferryman swims next to him and prevents him from being carried too far by the current. At certain favored fords near the French posts, ferryboats are available.

484 Livestock swim across, and the ferryman holds their muzzles out of the water to prevent them from drowning. These crossings take a long time and add up to considerable expense, and animals are often carried away by the current or snatched by crocodiles. Woe to the man who dispenses with ferrymen, if he is not familiar with the bottom of the river and the strength of the current! He often drowns, and those whose aid he scorned do nothing to help him. On the other hand, if the caravans postpone their departure for too long, the rivers will be dry, the grass burned off, and the animals will die of hunger or thirst, or they will arrive at the markets exhausted and lean and will sell poorly.

These journeys thus entail a number of hazards; in addition, although imported goods sell high, living expenses run equally high, and if a profit is to be made, one cannot grow fat along the way. He will make up for it when he returns to the village.

442 The need for middlemen brings other hazards. Lt. Marc, who was well qualified to discuss the subject because he was twice in command of the Léo Post, described the situation as follows: "The livestock upon arrival is bought by interpreter-brokers, middlemen between the butchers and the meat merchants, to whom the caravaneers are practically forced to resort. These men buy all the kola nuts brought by the forest natives and control the market prices... These interpreter-brokers apparently speculate on livestock in a most curious way. They have scouts who go out to meet the caravans, sometimes two days' march to the north. /61/ These scouts attempt to alarm the cattle owners with tendentious remarks, until they are willing to cede their herds at a low price. Sometimes, at the height of the business season, in January and February, livestock prices may fluctuate by one

11: Skinner E-5 (1955-1957) 1964

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[Pre-World War II Period]

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economic development should take precedence over everything else in the colonies. The Mossi were to be directly affected by the policies of both Van Vollenhoven and Sarraut. The colony of Haut-Sénégal et Niger was suppressed in March 1919, and replaced by the new colony of Upper Volta, in which the Mossi were the chief ethnic group. Moreover, Ouagadougou was chosen as the administrative center of this new colony.[19]

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The new Governor of the Upper Volta, Edouard Hesling, who arrived in Ouagadougou in November 1919, sympathized with Van Vollenhoven's views, but was even more interested in economic development. He was determined to transform Ouagadougou from a small town with an indigenous population of about 8,000 and some 76 European soldiers, merchants, and missionaries, into a capital worthy of a colony. Shortly after he arrived, he summoned the Mogho Naba and the traditional ministers and had them recruit some 2,000 salaried and unsalaried men to provide enough mud bricks and wooden beams to complete the construction of eleven administrative buildings before the rainy season began the following May.

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Hesling and his administrators believed that the Upper Volta, a country "with such diverse products and such a dense population, could attain an exceptional level of development by acquiring those economic elements which ensure prosperity."[20] Cotton was one of those elements. They believed that the Upper Volta "can and should export thousands of tons as soon as an easy and economical way of shipping is established."[21] By 1925, Hesling had constructed 6,000 kilometers of roads in the Upper Volta, about one-eighth the entire road network of French West Africa. Travelers in the Upper Volta at this time wrote of "the enforced enthusiasm with which the natives, under M. E. Hesling, have thrown themselves into agricultural labor and in particular into the planting of cotton."[22]

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The administration of the Upper Volta continued to furnish Mossi manpower for the development of the other colonies as well as for the colonial army. In 1922, it was asked to furnish "6,000 workers for the Thies-Kayes railway, renewable every six months; and under the same conditions to furnish 2,000 laborers to build the railways in the Ivory Coast. Similarly, with the consent of the chief administrator of the colony, it was possible to recruit a thousand workers in the regions of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso for private business in the Ivory Coast."[23] Londres, who visited the Upper Volta in the late 1920's, reports that Mossi country was known as "a 'reservoir' of manpower."[24] Burthe d'Annelet reports that during this same period, "The Minister of War [took] 45,000 men each year to compensate for the weakness of our metropolitan recruitment, and

their younger sons to become Moslems, and soon abandoned their active resistance to Islam.

Hesling did not permit the Mossi chiefs to revive their traditional religio-political rituals and ceremonies such as the Tense, but he continued to tolerate the Basgha. The French banned the Mossi market chiefs, because they believed (with some justification) that these officials used their offices to procure revenue for the chiefs. The difficulty was that the market chiefs were also responsible for arranging sacrifices to the market deities, which in the absence of such sacrifices would not protect the people from quarrels and violence in the market place. Some chiefs covertly retained their market chiefs; others obeyed the administration and remained anxious over the behavior of their subjects in the market. In general, however, most Mossi chiefs tried to adjust to the religious changes that were taking place, and sought to maintain at least surface amicability with all religious groups. Commenting upon the behavior of the Mogho Naba in this regard, Dim Delobson states:

> The Mogho Naba, above all, is a believer in animism like all his subjects, and it is hard to understand how he manages to reconcile his fetishism with the complex dogmas of Islam and with the many interdictions of Christianity. However, the Mogho Naba is quite capable of being a Catholic or a Moslem on appropriate occasions, while at the same time respecting the traditions of his ancestors. Thus, when the Christians are celebrating Christmas, the emperor of the Mossi devoutly attends midnight Mass. Nevertheless, he wears his fez [really the bonnet, which is the symbol of his office], just as the bishop wears his miter. He likewise embraces Islam for the three Moslem festivals.[47]

Hesling failed in his attempt to develop the Upper Volta as a viable colony, and many of the chiefs whom he had used as his auxiliaries lost not only a great deal of power but also a great deal of prestige in the eyes of their subjects because of the role they had played vis-à-vis the administration. By 1929 the economy of the Upper Volta was in poor condition: cotton production had declined; taxes (raised from 5,800,000 francs in 1921 to 18,274,000 francs in 1927 and scheduled to be raised to 26,400,000 francs in 1930) were unbearable; many of the roads that were too extensive, too little used, and too difficult to maintain had been abandoned; and more than 46,000 laborers who had worked in the cotton fields and on the roads had fled to the neighboring Gold Coast.[48] The Colonial Minister, Sarraut, ordered that the colony of the Upper Volta be dismembered. He states in his decree of September 1932 that the suppression of the Upper Volta "would permit appreciable savings, and would make the adminis-